



CURRENCY

Committee on Financial Services

Michael G. Oxley, Chairman

For Immediate Release:

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House Convenes Task Force on Identity Theft

House Financial Services Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee Chairwoman Sue Kelly (NY), along with Ways and Means Social Security Subcommittee Chairman Clay Shaw (FL), today convened the Death Master File Task Force, aimed at addressing a government loophole that makes deceased individuals' identities easy for thieves to steal.

A Financial Services Committee investigation revealed a lapse in Social Security practices that leaves the identities of deceased individuals vulnerable to theft – it takes four to six weeks to notify financial institutions and credit bureaus of deaths through what is called the Death Master File. The goal of the task force in the next four months is to reduce the amount of time it takes to process the information from 30 days to 10 days.

“We must ensure that changes are made to the system of reporting deaths so that families are not made victims at a time they are most vulnerable,” said Kelly. “This type of proactive effort is exactly what is needed to solve the problem.”

In addition to the investigation findings, the General Accounting Office found that some financial institutions were unaware of the Death Master File and/or lacked the necessary technology to process and maintain Death Master File data.

These problems have been illustrated by recent criminal investigations. A man held on suspicion of involvement in the Sept. 11 hijacking attacks illegally used the Social Security number of a New Jersey woman who died in 1991. In a separate case involving the recently deceased, one Ohio victim had been dead for 10 days when two felons assumed his identity and stole \$300,000 from his life savings to buy jewelry for resale on the black market.

These crimes would have been more difficult to commit if information were shared and utilized quickly by electronic technology.

“Preventing Social Security number fraud and identity theft may be a daunting task – but we can make a difference one step at a time,” said Shaw. “Today we can take an important step to ensure Social Security’s death information is made available more quickly by government and used more promptly by the financial services industry to update financial records.”

The Death Master Task Force is composed of witnesses who presented testimony at the Oct. 8 joint hearing before the Financial Services Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations and the Ways and Means Subcommittee on Social Security.

At the task force meeting, the Social Security Administration (SSA) committed to a weekly release of the death data to the National Technical Information Service (NTIS), a branch of the U.S. Department of Commerce which distributes the data to credit bureaus, credit card issuers, and other financial institutions. The NTIS is currently planning to release the data electronically starting in February 2002, which would further expedite the process.

“It is clear that there are many steps in this process where we lose time. Our goal is to trim the lag time at every step in the process so that we can close the door in the faces of the identity thieves,” said Financial Services Committee Chairman Michael G. Oxley.

"The fact that those involved in the terrorist attacks used false identities, including the use of a Social Security number of a woman who had been dead for 10 years, shows us that identity theft predators will stop at nothing," said Ways and Means Committee Chairman Bill Thomas. "Now more than ever government and the financial services industry need to work together to effectively share information and update financial records to help put a stop to these heinous crimes. I welcome the recommendations of this expert Task Force."

[Attached is a letter sent earlier this month by Chairwoman Kelly to Secretary of the Treasury Paul H. O'Neill regarding the issue.](#)

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